

Turkish government supports Saudi-led coalition's attacks on Yemen

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In a press release on Thursday, March 26, regarding the latest developments in Yemen, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared Ankara's support for "the military operation launched by a coalition force consisting of the countries in the region ... against the Houthi movement upon the request of the legitimately elected President Hadi".

"Strongly" condemning "the continuation of the unilateral actions by the Houthi movement militias", the ministry calls "upon the Houthi movement and its foreign supporters to give up on their acts threatening the peace and security in Yemen and the region."

At a press conference on the same day, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared his support to the Saudi-led military operation in Yemen and suggested that Turkey might give logistical support to the coalition. Accusing Iran—the country he once called his "second home"—of "trying to dominate the region," Erdoğan told journalists that Iran's efforts have "begun annoying" Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. "This is really not tolerable and Iran has to see this," he said.

The Turkish president repeated the foreign ministry's call that the militia and its "foreign supporters" should abandon their course of action, which "threaten[s] peace and security in the region ... Iran has to change its view. It has to withdraw any forces, whatever it has in Yemen, as well as Syria and Iraq and respect their territorial integrity."

These statements came after the telephone call between Erdoğan and US President Barack Obama, apparently at Ankara's request, though the pro-government daily *Sabah* reported that Obama initiated the call.

According to a White House statement, "The president spoke with Turkish President Erdoğan today

[Thursday] to discuss ongoing cooperation in the fight against ISIL [the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria militia] and common efforts to bring security and stability to Iraq and Syria."

On Friday, in response to Erdoğan's statement, Iran's foreign minister accused the Turkish president of fomenting strife in the Middle East. "It would be better if those who have created irreparable damage with their strategic mistakes and lofty politics would adopt responsible policies," Mohammad Javad Zarif said, according to the semi-official Fars news agency.

Speaking at a Turkish TV channel on Friday, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu cynically called for a "political solution to end the conflict". However, he gave no details on Erdoğan's mention of giving the Saudi-led military intervention logistical assistance.

Tensions between Iran and Turkey have surged as Iran takes a larger role in the fight against ISIL, sending military commanders to lead irregular forces in Iraq and Syria, while Ankara has lost all its influence in the region. Iran has considerable influence in Azerbaijan and Armenia, where Ankara has vital interests and is increasingly vital for Turkey as both a trading partner and energy supplier. Nonetheless, despite the risks to its relations with Iran, the Turkish government is strongly backing the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.

Until recently, Ankara was very reluctant to play any active role in the US-led coalition, under the colour of fighting against ISIS. It therefore had been subjected to considerable criticism amongst its NATO allies for shutting its eyes to foreign fighters who cross into Iraq and Syria via Turkey to join ISIS.

One of the main reasons that harmed Ankara's relations with its allies was Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). As the MB government of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt was toppled by a military

coup led by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, then chief of general staff, on July 3, 2013, Ankara stayed on the side of the MB government and condemned the coup.

Erdoʻan has consistently accused the “international community”, including Saudi Arabia, of hypocrisy for giving legitimacy to Sisi and the military coup in Egypt. Egypt cut ties with Turkey and expelled the Turkish ambassador from Cairo. Ankara retaliated by declaring Egypt’s ambassador to Turkey persona non grata.

Under US and Saudi pressure, Qatar, previously the main—if not the only—ally of Ankara in supporting the MB, has recently expelled some members of the MB and rebuilt friendly relations with Cairo. This left Ankara almost completely isolated in the region.

Faced with growing economic and political problems before parliamentary elections, accompanied by an undeclared regional isolation, the Turkish government decided to take an active role in a large-scale military operation against ISIS. However, the conflict between Cairo and Ankara remained unsolved, which would heavily damage Turkish export to the Arabian Peninsula and east Africa.

After the Syrian border was closed to Turkish transportation firms following the proxy war in Syria, Ankara signed a memorandum of understanding with Cairo in April 2012. It has established a transit-trade route, allowing Turkish trucks to reach Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries for three years. However, in October 2014 Egypt announced that it would not renew the agreement, as relations between the two countries reached a breaking point. The agreement is set to expire on April 23.

The agreement allows the use of Egyptian seaports to transport Turkish foodstuffs, electrical appliances and textile products to the markets in the Gulf. Due to ongoing wars in Syria and Iraq, Turkish exporters have already suffered from transportation costs, while many factories producing goods for Middle Eastern and African countries face the danger of closure.

Ankara needs Saudi Arabia, which, together with the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait is the main financial backer of the Sisi government, as mediator between Turkey and Egypt. Turkey also strives to get access to the petrodollars of these countries, which were the main investors in Turkey’s critical construction sector in the last decade.

Top Turkish officials, including President Erdoʻan, three ministers and a large official delegation therefore paid an official visit to Saudi Arabia early this month. Erdoʻan’s visit to Riyadh coincided with the visit of the Egyptian president, Sisi. Asked whether he might consider meeting with Sisi before he left for Saudi Arabia, Erdoʻan answered, “You must be joking. It’s out of question.”

The Egyptian dictator Sisi said the concurrence of Erdoʻan’s and his visits was just a coincidence.

Less than two weeks before Erdoʻan’s visit to Saudi Arabia, on February 18, Turkish Chief of General Staff General Necdet Özel joined a meeting in Riyadh of the US-led coalition against ISIS and declared Ankara’s commitment to the US-led coalition’s operation.

Ankara’s support to Saudi-led military strikes in Yemen and its tougher line against Iran is thus part of the Turkish government’s reconciling itself to the interests of US imperialism and Saudi Arabia.



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